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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effect of the Mexican American's bilingualism on his English language development. It cites recent research reports which state that bilingualism does not have a negative effect upon language development when socio-environmental factors are controlled or considered. Investigations of the syntactic development of Chicano youngsters show that bilingualism does not affect the Chicano's English language development in terms of syntactic patterning. The paper concludes that Chicano bilingualism, per se, is not detrimental to the Chicano's English language development. Reasons for the Chicano's reading and language difficulties must be sought elsewhere, perhaps within a cultural or motivational context. A list of references is included. (SK)

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Bilingualism and Language Development: The Effect of the Mexican American's Bilingualism on His English Language Development

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There has been a widely held assumption that the bilingualism of the Chicano has been detrimental to his English language development. Despite the spirit of the times, the desire to alleviate racial and ethnic tensions, the misconception still persists among teachers of Chicanos that a Spanish home language is a handicap for school success and that Chicanos with a Spanish home language are bound to experience academic failure in school, a self-fulfilling prophecy that has relegated an inordinate number of Chicano students to classes for the educably mentally retarded because many teachers have tended to equate English linguistic ability with cognitive ability (1). In California, legislation was necessary to protect the Chicano student from the bilingual, mentally retarded syndrome after it was revealed that Chicano students accounted for more than

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forty percent of the so-called mentally retarded placed in special education classes (2).

The educational system has overwhelmingly discouraged Chicano bilingualism. Some public schools have been known to enforce a "No Spanish" rule which prohibits Chicanos from speaking Spanish on school grounds and in classes. As many as 69.8 percent of the public schools, surveyed by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, have enforced the rule (3). Other public schools have not been responsive to the recommendation that bilingual/bicultural programs be adopted to meet the needs of Chicano students. Bilingual/bicultural programs to accommodate only 2.7 percent of the Chicano student population have been implemented although federal funds under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary School Act have been made available to public schools for such programs (4).

Not only has the educational system discouraged Chicano bilingualism, but it also has not provided the Chicano adequate instruction in the English language arts. By the twelfth grade 63 percent of the Chicano student population is reading six months below the national norm, with 24 percent of these still reading at the ninth grade or below. These Chicanos are the elite, i.e., the elite being those 60 percent who have

remained in school after an estimated 40 percent have dropped out. Only 5.5 percent of the Chicano students receive some form of English as a Second Language instruction. Less than 2 percent of all teachers of Chicano students are assigned to English as a Second Language programs, and most of these teachers have as little as six semester hours in English as a Second Language methodology. Compared to his monolingual peer, the Chicano student has generally scored lower on reading proficiency tests, scored lower on verbal achievement tests, and participated less in school activities requiring verbal proficiency (5).

Nevertheless, the Chicano has maintained his bilingualism. Chicano culture and Chicano Spanish were native to the Southwestern United States for many years before the arrival of the Anglo American, upon whose arrival the Chicano developed a bilingual verbal strategy which provided him communicative mobility in the Chicano and Anglo communities. Today the Chicano teaches his children Spanish as a matter of course, assuming that the school will teach his children English. In some Southwestern areas, the Chicano has developed a <u>caló</u>, or argot, which serves as an exclusive medium of communication intended to included the initiated Chicano and exclude the uninitiated monolingual English speaker (6).

The subsequent result of this language battle has been polarization between the Anglo majority culture and the Chicano minority culture which has not been beneficial to either group since neither group has benefited from the language diversity of the other. Further, the foot soldier (Chicano youth) has the most to lose in this language battle for he has the rather disconcerting choice of retaining his bilingualism with its possible negative effects to his language development, or of surrendering his bilingualism for the purposes of gaining less than adequate instruction in the English language arts.

What is needed is a resolution of the issue concerning the effects of bilingualism on language development. Resolution of the issue is paramount to Chicano parents, Chicano educators, and educators of Chicano youth who would not wish language difficulties upon Chicano youth. It is also paramount to the American culture, if the culture wishes to capitalize upon a language resource that it has, up to this time, discouraged. What follows is a review of the significant research that addresses itself to the effects of bilingualism on language development which hopefully should clarify the unresolved issue that bilingualism, <u>per se</u>, is detrimental to the Chicano's language development.

For the purposes of this essay, the term "Chicano" refers to school age Mexican American youngsters who are Spanish-English bilinguals.

Bilingualism and Language Development

In studies of bilinguals who were instructed in their second language, where the second language was the weaker language, adverse effects were shown in school progress and results. Studies conducted in Ireland by Macnamara (7) with bilinguals instructed in Gaelic instead of English showed a deterioration in school achievement. In the majority of Macnamara's studies in which attainment in math was investigated, it was reported that bilinguals were inferior to monolinguals in problem arithmetic (verbal reasoning) but not in mechanical arithmetic (computation). Macnamara attributed the differences between the two sets of findings to the differences in tasks. In tasks of mechanical arithmetic the subjects were required to carry out an operation via arithmetical symbols, but in tasks of problematic arithmetic the subjects were required to read and interpret prose statements.

In a study on the effects of bilingualism on reading, Macnamara (8) found that articulation and communication (oral) in the weaker language was slower

for the bilingual, and that encoding of ideas and organizing of syntactic patterns possibly occurred with less rapidity in the weaker language. The general finding that reading in a weaker language takes longer than reading in the stronger (for the bilingual) was reported by Lambert, et. al (9), and Kolers (10). Older studies reported like results. Welsh bilinguals instructed in their weaker language demonstrated progressive retardation in all areas of school achievement (11). Such a retardation was reported to occur over two years of primary teaching in the vernacular in Manila (12).

Complete reliance upon the above cited findings would lend support to the assumption that bilingualism, per se, is detrimental to the English language development of the Chicano. Yet, in studies where the bilingual's second language was not the weaker language, and where the bilingual could develop both languages fully, the bilingual's language development was not impaired. Having two languages seemed to have a positive effect on school achievement. Apparently, being bilingual facilitated the bilingual's awareness that there are varying ways to say the same thing.

Peal and Lambert (13) explored the effects of bilingualism on intellectual functionings and reported,

when socio-environmental variables are controlled, that bilinguals performed better than monolinguals on verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests. The investigators reported that the bilingual subjects had several advantages over their monolingual peers: 1) a language assest, 2) greater cognitive flexibility, and 3) a greater ability in concept formation than the monolingual. The investigators concluded that the bilinguals appeared to have a more diversified set of mental abilities than the monolinguals.

Lambert, Just, and Segalowitz (14) conducted a longitudinal study of middle-class English-speaking children who were taught a foreign language (French), which was also used as the medium of instruction. After two years of instruction in their weaker language, general improvement was experienced by the bilingual children. Even though the children were instructed in French, their weaker language, they demonstrated at an optimum level of skills in both the productive and reproductive aspects of French, and a generally excellent control of their home language, English. The investigators reported that socio-environmental variables were accounted for in the study, and that if interferences occurred between the children's two languages, its negative effect was minimal.

In Sweden, bilingual children were organized into two groups. The experimental group of bilingual, elementary children received an initial ten weeks of reading instruction in Pitean, the local dialect, after which they were advanced to classes conducted in literary Swedish. The control group of bilinguals, who were also Pitean-Swedish speakers, received all reading instruction in literary Swedish. At the end of the first ten weeks, the Pitean-taught group had progressed further in reading than the Swedish-taught group. At the end of the school year, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group on word recognition, speed, fluency, and accuracy of reading in literary Swedish. Beginning reading instruction in the vernacular and then switching to the school dialect had positive effects in this study (15).

Like results were reported in similar studies conducted in Mexico. The test data in these studies (16) indicated that the bilinguals, who were initially taught in the vernacular, read with greater comprehension than those initially taught in the Spanish of the school. These studies also reported that bilinguals initially instructed in the vernacular achieved literacy in both languages within two years.

Studies in the United States on Chicano bilingualism report that Spanish-English bilingualism does not negatively effect the Chicano's syntactic language development. Peña (17) conducted a study to ascertain whether Chicano first graders could control basic syntactic patterns of Spanish and English. Pena reported that the bilingual first graders could utilize basic Spanish and English syntactic patterns, and that the bilinguals had little or no difficulty generating transformations in Spanish and English. Garcia (18) conducted a study to identify and compare the oral English syntactic patterns utilized by adolescent, bilingual, lower- and middle-class Chicanos. The results of the study indicated that the Chicanos utilized all of the syntactic patterns basic to standard English, and that the Chicanos expressed a syntactic style consistent with their socio-economic status. The Chicanos spoke in codes somewhat similar to those described by Bernstein (19) in his studies with monolingual English adolescents. In the syntactic sense, the Chicanos were found to be native English speakers in that they utilized syntactic patterns much like monolingual English speakers.

Inherent Problems in the Research

What seems to be an irreconcilable divergency among the studies on the positive and negative effects of bilingualism on language development can be clarified when attention is focused on two problems concerning some studies on bilingualism: 1) the problem of defining "bilingualism;" 2) the problem of the limitations placed on linguistic studies of bilingualism.

First, linguists disagree on the conceptual components of bilingualism. In a survey of more than two decades of research on bilingualism, Jensen (20) found at least twelve distinctly different definitions of bilingualism. Some linguists defined the bilingual as one who has the ability to speak two languages, or one who has native-like control of two languages. Some defined a bilingual as a person who has been exposed to two languages. More recently, a Georgetown Conference on bilingualism (21) reached no consensus on the conceptual components of bilingualism although most of the conference topics revolved around the topic of bilingualism. Readings from the conference reveal that scholars are very much in disagreement as to what the term means, and that Weinreich's classic coordinate-compound distinction (22) must be much more closely examined. Frustration was expressed concerning the

distinction,which describes two possible bilingual semantic systems,because little has been done to describe the semantic system of monolinguals.

Second, linguists have limited studies on bilingualism to purely linguistic variables while ignoring socio-environmental variables which play an important role in the language development of bilinguals. Darcy (23) conducted a diachronic survey of the research related to cognitive development and bilingualism. She discovered that the majority of the studies related to the effects of bilingualism on the measurement of intelligence have been conducted within the past decade on Spanish-English bilinguals in the United States without regard to socio-environmental variables. She also discovered that when socio-environmental variables were controlled or accounted for that the bilinguals performed equally well when compared to monolinguals on verbal and non-verbal instruments. Fishman (24) noted that bilingual studies have been construed by linguists as purely linguistic, and that these linguistic studies failed to integrate social, cultural, and environmental variables during investigations of bilingual language behavior.

Conclusions

Just what is known about about the relationship between language development and bilingualism? Two divergent themes have emerged. One theme proposes that bilingualism has a negative effect upon language development to the extent that bilingualism is believed to cause retardation in the bilingual's school progress related to reading and language achievement. Another theme proposes that bilingualism has a positive effect upon language development to the extent that bilingualism is believed to enhance the reading and language achievement of the bilingual. What seems to be clear is that bilingualism is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon which must be approached from more than a purely linguistic bias. Problems of definition no doubt are related to the sociolinguistic setting and the language communities from which the speakers of two languages emanate. A UNESCO bilingual in Paris, France certainly is different when contrasted to the bilingual Chicano in Paris, Texas. Factors related to the bilingual's socio-environmental experiences which should be considered in future research are:

--when the bilingual is introduced to his second language;

--when the bilingual is taught his second language;

--by whom the bilingual is introduced to and taught his second language;

--the degree the bilingual is encouraged (was encouraged) to use both languages prior to and during schooling.

These factors point to the bilingual's socio-environmental experiences which should no longer be ignored. That a strong relationship exists, for example, between a speaker's social class and his language development indicates that socio-environmental factors such as those listed above must be examined for possible ramifications concerning the language development of bilinguals.

The assumption that the Chicano's bilingualism, per se, is detrimental to the Chicano's English language development begs the question. Intuitively, bilingualism should enhance language development for it provides the speaker two cognitive systems by which he can manipulate a language, and it provides the speaker two cultural perspectives by which he can control his environment. Objectively, the assumption is limited to a direct cause and effect relationship between language development and bilingualism, a faulty causal relationship that excludes socio-environmental factors that have an effect upon language development. Recent research reports that bilingualism does not have a negative effect

upon language development when socio-environmental factors are controlled or accounted for, and the research on the syntactic development of Chicano youngsters report that bilingualism does not effect the Chicano's English language development in terms of syntactic patterning. While generalizations are premature at this time, suffice it to conclude that Chicano bilingualism, per se, is not detrimental to the Chicano's English language development. Reasons for the Chicano's reading and language difficulties must be sought among other factors perhaps within a cultural or motivational context.

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